

A diatribe in defense of beauty

by Robert Weinstock

One person's response
to "new art music"
featuring works
by several Oberlin
faculty composers

For some of us the presence of the Conservatory of Music is what makes life in Oberlin truly worth living. I have said this many times since first coming to dwell and teach here. The availability of a limitless store of beautiful music, expertly performed by students, faculty and visiting artists, is a luxury that for many of us surpasses any other that may enrich our lives.

With the possible exception of Martin Luther King's autumn 1964 visit, the greatest Oberlin events of my two decades here have been musical: (1) The miraculously spontaneous Mozart *Requiem* in May 1970, rehearsed in four days and conducted by Robert Fountain, in response to the Kent State killings—performed magnificently first in the National Cathedral in Washington, then here in Finney Chapel just one week after rehearsals began! (2) The three-day Contemporary Music Festival in March 1963 devoted entirely to the music of Igor Stravinsky, with the composer attending—and, for the Festival finale, himself conducting with dynamic authority the Oberlin Orchestra and the Oberlin College Choir in his *Symphony of Psalms*!

Over the years I have on rare occasions heard one or another College Faculty colleague complain that the instruction-per-pupil cost is considerably higher in the Conservatory than it is in the College of Arts and Sciences—that, in effect, the College Faculty is thereby subsidizing the Conservatory of Music. Without ever investigating the budgetary validity of the allegation, I have on each such occasion been fast to speak out sharply in support of any such subsidization—on the single simple basis of the continuing nontrivial contribution by the Conservatory, its faculty and its students, to the availability of beauty in the world at large.

From time to time over the years I have attended concerts at which pieces composed by Conservatory Faculty

members and/or their students were performed. Several of these pieces I have found enjoyable, some others of them too subtle and/or too complex to be grasped and enjoyed in a single hearing. Some I found downright dull, even trivial. Many of the pieces, I conjecture, have made their ways promptly into well-earned obscurity. It would be foolish to expect composers of the rank of Bartok, Ives, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, or even Menotti to be teaching at the Oberlin Conservatory—as foolish as it would be to expect a member of our Physics Department to win a Nobel Prize. But this is no reason for any of us to ignore totally the publicly offered efforts of our across-campus colleagues.

Early this autumn there appeared in each faculty mailbox a page bearing a rather cleverly contrived hypothetical exchange between two faculty members, in which A pointedly chides B for his/her failure to attend concerts of "new art music"—a term that was previously unknown to me. The key thrust by A: "How can you, a reasonably intelligent and concerned person, feel so comfortable (might I say even smug) with this cultural omission while residing in an environment exceptionally rich in opportunities?" Attend, he/she urges B, the Autumn Festival of New Music—of which the first program, on 15 October,

was to consist of music by several Oberlin faculty composers.

Although I had not planned to attend any of the Festival concerts, I found myself drawn by the character of A's argument. (Am I not, after all, a reasonably intelligent and concerned person? Should I not take advantage of what A calls "a massive opportunity this week to hear some music of [my] colleagues...") So, particularly eager to hear a piece on the program by Wendell Logan—none of whose music, somehow, had ever before reached my ears—I did attend the first Festival session on 15 October. My reward was almost immediate: Warren Darcy's *Elegy*, a piano piece executed by Charles Floyd '80, opened the program. It is serious and moving, perhaps even beautiful in portions; I hope to be able to hear it again in recital. I joined enthusiastically in the applause that followed Floyd's excellent performance of it. But then...

All ugliness broke loose! A something-or-other, having earlier been set quadraphonically onto magnetic tape, came egurgitating unrestrainedly from a number of loudspeakers variously located in the maximally darkened Warner Concert Hall. These "Subway Songs #1 and #2" were "conceived," according to the person who admits responsibility for their existence, "during a long subway ride"—an "environment" to which they "owe much of their clangy, insistent and cavernous sound." I have in my 62-plus years taken thousands of subway rides; none of them has been as auditorily offensive as was this example of "new art music" to which I had been lured by clever, misleading advertising.

The world has in it far too much of ugliness; some part of it, perhaps, is required in pursuit of valuable social goals. Subways, for example, are presumably necessary means of useful transportation. But it is wrong—utterly wrong—to impose additional ugliness unnecessarily upon a segment of the world dedicated in its very being to the generation and promotion of beauty. It is also wrong to teach young people—Oberlin students—that such ugliness is

On expression in music, opinions and politics

by Edward J. Miller

First of several faculty reactions to the criticism of Subway Songs #1 and #2 and most of its conclusions

seiner Muse, durch welche er den besungenen Gegenstand, die Kunst, und sich selber entweicht."

[Should not everyone, the dearer Beethoven and his art are to him, the more fervently wish that oblivion might very soon draw an expiatory veil on such an aberration of his muse, through which he has desecrated the glorified object, Art, and himself.]

Beethoven showed his anger at this, in a marginal note scrawled in his copy of *Caecilia*:

"O du elender Schuft! Was ich scheisse, ist besser als du je gedacht!"

(A vulgarity better left untranslated here.)

2. Tchaikovsky's Diary, entry under Oct. 9, 1886:

"I played over the music of that scoundrel Brahms. What a giftless bastard! It annoys me that this self-inflated mediocrity is hailed as a genius. Why, in comparison with him, Raff is a giant, not to speak of Rubinstein, who is after all a live and important human being, while Brahms is chaotic and absolutely empty dried-up stuff."

3. Boston Herald, Feb. 9, 1924:

The Rite of Spring

Who wrote this fiendish *Rite of Spring*. What right had he to write the thing. Against our helpless ears to fling, his crash, clash, cling, clang, bing, bang, bang.

And then to call it *Rite of Spring*.
The season when on joyous wing
The birds melodious carols sing
And harmony's in everything!
He who could write the *Rite of Spring*,
If I be right, by right should swing!

Fortunately, these opinions, no doubt as heartfelt as Dr. Weinstock's, have had no long-range, adverse effects either on the composers in question or on their music. The music of Beethoven, Brahms and Stravinsky remains with us. We experience its entire range of expression, not just a narrow band of goodness and smiles and sunshine and haunting melodies some call "beautiful."

From time to time, throughout the history of concert music, lovers of "beauty" have been outraged at having their ears assaulted by what they perceive as "noise," "cacophony," "ugliness," etc., in the guise of a musical composition. Some have felt a compelling urge to boo, whistle, utter catcalls, imitations of body noises and other displays of contempt, especially if they paid to get in. A well-known extreme example of this behavior took place at the opening of Stravinsky's ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring) in 1913 in Paris. Upon hearing the opening strains of the bassoon solo, the audience took sides and a virtual riot ensued before the end of part one of the ballet. On rare occasions, I have attended concerts that resulted in similar reactions from one or two members of the audience. I felt somewhat embarrassed and thought it rather childish and vulgar, but had no strong objection unless it interfered with my right to hear the music.

I sat next to Dr. Weinstock at the Oct. 15 Oberlin Faculty Composers Concert and, after we exchanged hellos, I expressed my surprise and delight at seeing him there. Warren Darcy's *Elegy*, I thought, was an excellent piece and performed well by pianist Charles Floyd. Having heard several pieces by Conrad Cummings, I looked forward to his *Subway Songs #1 and #2* for quadraphonic tape. In that brief moment when

It seems to me that Dr. Robert Weinstock's "A diatribe in defense of beauty" was written in thoughtful reflection and with careful prose about an unpleasant experience that jarred his esthetics of music. I do not agree with his conclusions but I defend (perhaps not to the death) his right to draw them and welcome the opportunity to write a rebuttal.

"Beauty" is only one area in the vast realm of musical expression that (I believe) ranges from joy to sadness, victory to defeat, the familiar to the strange, love to hatred, friendliness to hostility, complacency to frenzy, beauty to ugliness, etc., etc., and all the degrees of nuance between these extremes, as well as the rarefied beauty of the intellect in music. Even so, accepting a limited version of the nature of musical expression, I think his title might be more accurate if it were "A diatribe in defense of beauty as I, Robert Weinstock, perceive it."

Other persons, like Dr. Weinstock, on experiencing the music of their times, have also documented their reactions in print. Most of the extant writings are by professional music critics, composers and conductors, but since the appreciation of music is in everyone's personal domain, I see no reason why the opinions of those sophisticated in the art cannot be compared with Dr. Weinstock's opinions. Their use of rhetoric is quite similar. The following examples from Nicolas Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective* (Coleman-Ross Company Inc., New York, 1965) will illustrate my point:

1. Gottfried Weber on Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory*, in *Caecilia*, Berlin, No. 10, 1825:

"Muss nicht jeder, je teurer ihm Beethoven und seine Kunst ist, desto inniger wünschen dass doch recht bald die Vergessenheit den versöhnenden Schleier werfen möge über solcher Vererrung

I realized the Subway Songs were over and the applause would shortly commence, a flood of thoughts raced through me:

good ideas - excellent development - well controlled breathing spaces - convincing - professional control of his instrumentation - it took me to those fantasy places where music I like usually takes me ----

The applause started. It was enthusiastic but not enough to drown out the more enthusiastic boose emanating from Dr. Weinstock. I became incensed and muttered some highly uncomplimentary phrases. I don't think he heard me because when I apologized during the intermission he seemed not to understand why. I thought my apology was due because, after all, he had not interfered with the performance, his reactions would not adversely affect the composer in the long run, and his behavior seemed to be almost beyond his control.

Written negative opinions on music, even when they appear in influential journals, are usually harmless. Audible expressions of negative opinions at concerts are understandable, if not "correct" concert etiquette. There is a point, however, at which criticism goes beyond merely expressing a personal opinion. When someone advises us to *form a policy on or to withdraw support from* an area of creative or scholarly work, this is more than a personal reaction. It is an attempt to gather power in order to implement his opinion. Any person or group of persons having the power to decide "what is artistically good" for the rest of us inevitably will lead us into mediocrity, stifle freedom of expression, and bring us to a halt; into a static culture devoid of vitality and meaning. Dr. Weinstock's opinions and reactions to music as it affects *him* are certainly valid, respectable, and harmless enough but much more serious are the statements in his "Diatribes" that follow:

But it is wrong—utterly wrong—to impose additional ugliness unnecessarily upon a segment of the world dedicated in its very being to the generation and promotion of beauty. It is also wrong to teach young people—Oberlin students—that such ugliness is worth contributing to the world; it is inciting them to dishonesty when they are taught to pass it off as "music."

How, I also wonder, can I continue to defend a College subsidy to the Conservatory of Music on the single simple basis of the Conservatory's contribution to beauty? Fortunately the beauty is still

there in great abundance; but can we afford the ugliness with which it cohabits?—even if its *dollar* cost to the College is zero? Could we afford the ugliness even if it brought monetary profit to the College?

This kind of invective reminds me of other occasions when persons or groups have caused great harm to scholars or artists for the sake of "keeping the minds of our young people safe" (from Socrates), or "preserving the Purity of German music" (against Schönberg).

I can't imagine controlling our concert programs to please the musical taste of Dr. Weinstock or anyone else. We thrive artistically and our students learn in the spirit of freedom, diversity and experimentalism. As for the threat to discontinue his defense of a College subsidy to the Conservatory, I can only advise him that we would welcome his continued support, but will not sacrifice our freedom of expression in order to receive it.

To summarize, I am now familiar with Dr. Weinstock's opinions about music. I can respect those opinions up to the point where he would restrict the exposure of our students to the music he considers "beautiful." I welcome Dr. Weinstock's (or anyone else's) opinions, so long as those individual opinions do not become the bases for prescribed courses of action.

I, too, have opinions about music. It is my opinion that the Oct. 15 concert, in its entirety, was an exciting, mind-opening musical experience.

The next Oberlin Faculty Composers Concert will take place on Friday, March 5, 1982 at 8:30 p.m. in Warner Concert Hall.

Quote without comment

Prof. Weinstock's "diatribe" sounds vaguely familiar!!!! Aaaaashhh! Here it is:

"Another faction denies that the work has any artistic value and professes to see in it an untamed striving for singularity which had failed, however, to achieve in any of its parts beauty or true sublimity and power. By means of strange modulations and violent transitions, by combining the most heterogeneous elements, as for instance when a pastoral in the largest style is ripped up by the basses, by three horns, etc., a certain undesirable originality may be achieved without much trouble; but

genius proclaims itself not in the unusual and the fantastic, but in the beautiful and the sublime."

Quoted from a review of the first public performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 (Eroica) as reported by the correspondent of the *Freymüthige*. (*Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, revised and edited by Elliot Forbes, Princeton University Press, 1964, pg. 376.)

Walter Aschaffenburg '51
Professor of composition and music theory

Conrad Cummings responds

Is there anything beautiful about a man murdering his father, marrying his mother and blinding himself when he realizes what he's done? As a story it certainly deals with sordid and ugly personal affairs. Yet *Oedipus Rex* is an accepted masterpiece. If it were about a family picnic instead of murder, incest and self-mutilation, would it still be considered a great work?

Something happens in the fashioning of ugly reality into highly structured art that makes for an exciting result, and one that perhaps makes us better able to deal with the uglier sides of being alive.

I hate the noise of subways and for that very reason I wanted to tame it by finding a musical form as satisfying as the material engendering it is abrasive and alienating.

Dr. Weinstock does not seem to question the shape I was able to make—which would be a valid point for criticism if he felt the structure of the piece were not strong enough to contain and subdue the upsetting content. Instead, he seems only to argue with the choice of content. Does that mean he would favor the elimination of all art that takes as its subject matter the potentially upsetting? The result would, of course, be the reduction of drama to the T.V. sit-com. And music? Goodbye to the Beethoven Fifth—too gloomy and angry. O.K. for the Ninth, but cut the first movement, not uplifting enough.

As for Dr. Weinstock's booing, I'm all for it. Far better to be aboveboard in these things than to settle into silent rancor. Strong feelings strongly expressed are signs of a vital artistic community, all the more so in a community with as long a tradition of cultural and political pluralism as Oberlin.

Conrad Cummings is assistant professor of music theory and technology.

an open letter

Dear Bob,

As you are entitled to your subjective opinion on the arts, I trust you will grant me an equal opinion, and even a slight advantage in the particular area of music as well as aesthetics. In both fields I can point to years of study and application on the professional level.

In your fourth paragraph you display our ignorance of the accomplishments of your composer colleagues in the Conservatory. But your comparison does serve to establish Bob Weinstock's limitations of musical taste, experience and general knowledge, not to mention our lack of awareness of post World War II trends in particular. All of which saves you huffing and puffing about a half-century behind those of us who are active in the field. You apparently topped listening and learning with Ives and Bartok, both dead for several decades.

The composer of *Subway Songs* can introduce very favorable reviews of his work by a variety of competent critics. A glance through Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective* might amuse you and also inform you as to how pathetically mistaken some of the dunderheads of history have been regarding the works of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Wagner, R. Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, Bartok—and many more. Right through the 19th century there were "musicians" who "corrected" the introduction of Mozart's "Dissonant" Quartet. Doubtless they were the same people who refused to play the late Beethoven quartets on the grounds that the composer was deaf and obviously taking leave of his senses when he wrote them.

Now, Bob, about those terms *beauty* and *ugliness*. I should think anyone who had had a year of undergraduate philosophy would know better than to use them as criteria of artistic merit. How do you feel about Picasso's *Guernica* as compared to the sylvan landscape on your grocer's calendar?

To attempt to threaten the Conservatory on the basis of "cohabiting with ugliness" is such a futile and cockeyed argument that I'm ashamed that a fel-

low faculty member would stoop so low. That's the kind of argument Hitler used.

You do acknowledge that the applause for *Subway Songs* was "long and enthusiastic." Perhaps this applause was an indication that your feelings made you a minority of one.

Joseph Wood
Professor of
composition and
music theory

A final response

To commence on a positive point: Mr. Weinstock did take the time from his life to attend the concert and did become sufficiently engaged to make a minor spectacle, from whence ensued this printed discussion. I admire his spirit and applaud his passion. I just disagree with his philosophy.

As an antidote to being unable to accept the messages of contemporary art, I suggest a reading of the essay, "The Testimony of Modern Art," by William Barrett. In his introductory remarks Mr. Barrett offers the following observation:

We have simply got to give up the attempt to assess ourselves for posterity; the men of the future will form their own opinions without our help. What we so self-consciously call "modern art" after all, is nothing more or less than the art of this time, our art; there is no other today. If we could have a different art, or a better, we would have it. As it is, we are lucky in this period to have any art at all. The Philistine rebukes the artist for being willful, as if all of modern art were a deliberate conspiracy against him, the viewer; the artist can hardly hope to make this man understand that art is not a mere matter of conscious will and conscious contrivance, and that the artist, by changing his ideas (even by adopting the Philistine's) will not become a different person living at a different time and place. In the end the only authentic art is that which has about it the power of inevitability.

One of the most troublesome of the many reactionary features of Mr. Weinstock's diatribe, is his misguided belief in an external value system. That is, his espousal of an abstract and unchanging code of aesthetics which one might use

as a standard of beauty of any culture: to wit, "...but I sure know ugliness when I hear it."

What is beautiful, and meaningful, in art is determined primarily by the degree to which that art is evaluated as being truly organic to its society, and thus, in some manner or other, is thereby reflective of the society. Our art only tells us about ourselves. It does so in a language and symbology that accordingly must be drawn from and nurtured by its contemporary culture (which, in its turn, is at least partially a result of its history).

If there must be some ultimate judgment of worth, it can only be a judgment rendered by our posterity. Their standard will have something to do with the veracity with which our art and our science respond to the eternal archeological inquiries about the tracings of man's endeavors: who were we, what kind of beings were we?

I would suggest that the unfettered process (writing-painting-filming, testing) of creating these artifacts (art products, technology) is a value of far greater magnitude than any particular individual's (or group of individuals') opinion of the results of that process, regardless of the depth of his/her passion. Our students' aesthetic developments are incorruptible as long as they are educated within an environment that maintains a relationship with process. To permit any one aesthetic sensibility to govern this development is antithetical to a responsible education and eventually leads to not merely a static culture, but a dead one. But I must add, inasmuch as Mr. Weinstock's sentiments are shared by others, that a society at war with its own art is a self-loathing organism in some danger of extinction.

Faculty member A: Are you saying that you don't like contemporary music unless it conforms to paradigms of the 17th, 18th and 19th century?

Faculty member B: I may not know anything about new music but I know what I like.

A: What's that?

B: I like what I know.

A: That figures.

B: This music is ugly.

A: Don't kill the messenger.

Randolph Coleman
Professor of composition
and music theory

worth contributing to the world; it is inciting them to dishonesty when they are taught to pass it off as "music."

How, I wonder, can one have listened to Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, even Dvorak, Sibelius, Berg, Martinu, Wood, Aschaffenburg, Darcy—and then give the name "music" to the eardrum-lacerating mind-twisting soul-offending air-polluting electronic product of the kind that spewed from loudspeakers into Warner Hall the evening of 15 October 1981? How, I also wonder, can I continue to defend a College subsidy to the Conservatory of Music on the single simple basis of the Conservatory's contribution to beauty? Fortunately the beauty is still there in great abundance; but can we afford the ugliness with which it cohabits?—even if its dollar cost to the College is zero? Could we afford the ugliness even if it brought monetary profit to the College?

My indignation on 15 October 1981 rose high; it rises again whenever I think of that evening. Yet I continue to wonder whether, all during the long, enthusiastic applause that followed the emission of *Subway Songs*, I really ought to have expressed my feelings—as I did certainly do—by vigorously booing, seething with indignation, irresistibly impelled by firm conviction. Frankly, I just don't know. Surely I regret the pain I may have caused friends of mine who were there in attendance. Yet I deplore more feelingly the affront to human sensibilities engendered by the manufacture and propagation of ugliness masquerading under the name of music.

(Two additional electronic tapes were unleashed quadraphonically upon the audience that evening. Admittedly neither was quite so offensive to me as *Subway Songs* had been; yet I was forced, for considerable periods during at least one of the two later pieces, to protect my ears by cupping my hands over them. Irony was served me by the announcement, midway through the program, that Wendell Logan's piece would not be performed. I have still not heard anything by that composer.)

Propagators of the "electronic-music" fetish and others of a deeply philosophical turn of mind are sure to declare that the label "ugliness" is but an individual's purely subjective judgment. They and some others will chide me for not having an "open mind." They will challenge my calling their wares "ugliness masquerading under the name of music" and insist that I produce an operational definition

of music on the basis of which the characterization can be evaluated. Well, a mind so far open that it can no longer contain within it the ability to distinguish between ugliness and beauty is a mind I do not wish to possess. I may not know much about music, but I sure know ugliness when I hear it!

Student's comment

There is a real threat implied by Prof. Weinstock's "Diatribes" that, I hope, is jumping off the page at the concerned reader. Prof. Weinstock's world view, at least from an aesthetic viewpoint, surely forms a rather closed system (I am here assuming that a closed mind implies, somewhat, a closed system of thinking unreceptive to outside influence) of which the Beautiful fulfills only a functional role. The Beautiful is no more than a warm house or a heavy coat in winter: it serves merely to provide refuge from a perceived threat of world ugliness. And if, for some reason, Beauty's ability to protect and to provide refuge should ever be threatened it will be necessary to take whatever steps possible to maintain Beauty's functional role.

Prof. Weinstock is, in effect, telling us that our presence as musicians at Oberlin serves merely to provide him and the like-minded a certain means of comfort in this world and unless we stop fooling around and start cranking out the Beautiful we can expect to be denied further sustenance. We thank Prof. Weinstock for having so heartily supported the Conservatory in the past, but now we can see where such support has been based: Not, simply, "I know what I like and wish you to know that you cannot change my opinion," but rather he seeks to maximize return while minimizing investment.

I have always felt that my work as a musician was intimately tied to my existence as a human being and as a member of society. As Al Otte '71, founder of The Percussion Group (ensemble in residence at the University of Cincinnati), said in 1973:

I insist that my profession be relevant to the world in which I function: and I believe it is as simple as that. Everyone is invited to be aware of a relevance between the thoughts they consider important and the medium in which they create, simply through their desire for such relevance and the consequent opportunity to establish analogous systems.

Given my belief that much work and attention needs to be directed at the growing threats to continued human survival (to get right down to the basic concern which too often escapes us) it should be relatively easy to understand my objection to being expected to participate (just sit there and do what you're told) in "a segment of the world dedicated in its very being to the generation and promotion of beauty." Nothing, to me, seems as trivial as to do so.

For, the Beautiful results not from any inherent physical properties in sound or music (witness the debate, in some circles, as to which is more beautiful: just intonation or equal temperament) but rather, I would suggest, the Beautiful is a socially, culturally evolved archetypal image of sorts (we can all appreciate, I believe, that even though the two sides of the just intonation/equal temperament debate disagree as to just what physical properties of sound invoke the Beautiful, they are both appealing to a commonly held feeling for what the Beautiful is) and as such should be considered with as much a critical eye as, for instance, the nuclear arms race: both result from a social order that is slowly but surely destroying (among other things) its environment and therefore its only means for survival.

Within this context, then, I see my work as a musician as providing a means to explore an ever-evolving world view and to work towards, if it is indeed possible, the necessary change in human thinking which may improve our chances for continued survival. This is not, I realize, the traditional stance for a musician to take. But we might as well face up to it: given the growing severity of the situation, we can expect any such change to involve the whole of society, including both the sciences and the arts. Let us not waste valuable time and energy trying to cover up that, which by its very ugliness, serves as a constant reminder of the work yet to be done.

Charles Wood '81
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member of the New
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